

**Journey of Remembrance and Renewal: Sha'ar Communities Gate of Discovery
Goes to Berlin and Krakow**

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Friends,

On this 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, I want to share the words I spoke upon our community's return from Berlin and Krakow last May, 2014. As I reread them in the wake of last summer's war in Israel and Gaza and the reactions around the world, as well as the numerous terrorist attacks that have plagued Israel since, and in the wake of ongoing global terrorist activity revealing not only the extreme fanaticism of some Muslim factions but the relentless anti-Semitism that persists in our day, a part of me feels naïve for the hope I express, even as I speak about the unfathomable evil humans are capable of inflicting upon one another. Still, my prayer as I share this text is that the equally unfathomable ability of the human spirit to transcend such pain and hatred continues to carry us as we pursue a world of justice, motivated by memory, and directed towards peace.

L'shalom,

Dini

Bleary-eyed and foggy after our return from ten days in Germany and Poland the evening before, I began to cry as I waited for my son Aaron to emerge from baggage claim at Newark airport. It was 6am and his ELAL jet had just touched down from Israel where, together with a few hundred other BBYO teens, he spent 6 days touring after participating in the March of the Living in Auschwitz the week before.

Aaron is eighteen and a seasoned traveler. I had no worries about him adjusting to being away. Yet while I could share his excitement at being in Israel, especially for Yom Hazikaron and Yom Ha'Atzmaut, it was hard to be separated while trying to comfort him as he walked the camps of unfathomable evil in Auschwitz-Birkenau,

particularly since I had not been there yet myself and would only arrive for our group's visit the following week. We spoke on the phone often while he was in Poland. He shared that he felt both deep anger at what was done to his people and to millions of others by the Nazis, but also immense pride being there with over ten thousand young Jews affirming in no uncertain terms the continued vitality and strength of the Jewish people.

In a poignant reversal of roles, on the eve of our group's Auschwitz visit both Aaron and my older son Natan, who attended March of the Living two years ago, offered me words of comfort to ease my trepidation about stepping into the place of such horrors, words I would share with our travelers the next morning.

So why was I crying at the moment of Aaron's and my happy reunion? We were both home safely after life-changing journeys, both anxious to share stories and feelings. And there I was, crying.

I am sure they were, as tears often are, symbolic of many and varied emotions. There are tears of relief at your child's safe return after being away from home. There are tears of gratitude for their courage to make difficult but important journeys. And there are tears of defiance and fierce pride that 69 years after the liberation of Auschwitz, Jews - young and old - boldly return, year after year, to the places where our legacy was nearly extinguished, only to return invigorated and determined to secure our own destiny, and to stand up to the evil hatreds, persecutions and violence that continue to threaten humanity. To behold that impassioned resolve on the faces of the teens spilling into Newark airport was an awesome sight. Those are the tears that streamed down my face as I welcomed Aaron home and breathed a sigh of deep gratification for having returned our group similarly proud and passionate, and whole.

It's strange for me that, for the most part, I've been pretty silent since we returned. Yes, it's a busy season we came home to – graduations, kids home from college, summer plans, etc. But I've been uncharacteristically quiet with respect to trip follow up. On most Sha'ar trips I have half the article about our adventure written by the time we land back home. This time, I've found myself struggling with what to actually say about our time together in Germany and Poland. I've certainly shared lots of stories with people about the sites we saw, the guides we had, the people we met, the food we ate, the tears we shed and the laughs we had. But articulate what to make of our experience? To choose and organize a set of words to define what it all means? That's proven to be much, much harder. I'm not sure if I can. Not sure if I want to. Not sure if I should.

What I can share now, three weeks after returning, are three of the lasting impressions that have begun to cohere in my heart and mind:

The unspeakable evil of which humans are capable of inflicting upon one another.

In Germany we walked the streets and examined monuments --which appear on practically ever block-- testifying to the physical and societal moves made in the 1930s to diminish the basic human freedoms and rights of the Jews, such as the Nuremberg Laws, stripping Jews of their dignity to live, work, marry and study in freedom. We huddled in the Wannsee Villa, on the banks of a beautiful lake and stunning beaches, where sophisticated, enlightened leaders sealed the fate of millions of people with their murderous Final Solution. We stood on the platforms of the railway tracks where Jews were deported to be eliminated from Germany and the rest of Europe, indeed from the human race. In Poland we walked the camps of Auschwitz and Birkenau, moving through barracks, gas chambers, and crematoria in which educated and cultured men and women systematically reduced millions of fellow men and women to slaves, numbers, bodies and ashes. The unfathomable cruelty, so surreal,

can render one speechless, bereft not only of grandparents, parents, siblings, relatives and friends, but also of words.

How is it that a person can willfully inflict such pain and torture on another person? Perhaps the question sounds naïve to us who have learned to tune out the daily reports of violence in families, cities and nations here and around the world droning out of our TVs, laptops and phone apps. But there's something different here. We discussed endlessly whether the Shoah was unique. It feels such to many of us: the systematic, hyper-organized, scientific and technological process of mass murder; the sheer number of people murdered (11 million), the diabolical, irrational hatred of the Jews. Some historians, including one of our guides, argue the opposite. They've killed us before, and they'll try to kill us again. Just as they did, successfully, last Shabbat in Belgium.

When we fell into our seats on the plane home after 10 intense days, I thought I'd relax by watching a movie. I turned on "12 Years a Slave". I know. Why not something a little heavier? But the truth is, within five minutes I was reminded that the story of the Shoah, while one of enormous loss and pain for us Jews, is part of a larger story that began long before the Shoah and continues to unfold today: the unspeakable evil of hatred, persecution and violence that plagues every era, with the roles of perpetrator and victim shifting between peoples, sometimes going back and forth.

Yes, we are also witness – throughout history-- to immeasurable, selfless and courageous acts of kindness. Some are equally unfathomable, and yet, we can relate, because most of us have good, decent instincts. But when you come face to face with the atrocities we are capable of inflicting on each other such as those of the Shoah, it's disorienting on a deep, existential level. If another human is capable of that, am I too? As I yearn to refine my deeds, my feelings and my emotions in this life

of mine, how can I accept the reality that there are those around me capable of such horrors? It's not enough to say, there are good people and there are bad people. How is anyone capable of doing such harm? What does that say about the human race? Just today I heard the story of a woman in some African country, I can't recall which, languishing in a prison cell in shackles, along with her newborn baby, sentenced to death because she's a believing Christian and accused of rejecting her Muslim faith. When will we learn? When will we stop hurting each other? The awareness of the human capacity for evil is numbing. For this reason, perhaps the most moving part of our visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau, perhaps even the most respectful to its victims, was the time we took to be alone, each of us in our own space, and to sit, in silence. I have carried that silence back home with me and I'm not sure yet where to put it.

The Complexity of Memory.

Remembrance is an act of loyalty to the one who is being remembered. We must never forget what happened and we must strive to preserve the memories of those who were murdered. I find myself of late filled with a sense of emptiness for all the lives that were never given the chance to be lived. I train a Bar Mitzvah student and find myself thinking about the children who never lived to have a Bar Mitzvah. I prepare for my children's graduations and watch them succeed in high school and college and am filled with images of millions young adults whose dreams were reduced to staying alive one more day. I see a baby, utterly helpless without his or her parents, and shudder at the nauseating torture and indignity Jewish babies suffered at the hands of Nazis who used them as target practice. These memories aren't mine or my family's. They're all of ours. They belong to the Jews and they belong to humanity.

And yet, as much as memory is meant to serve a purpose – in this case, to avoid us ever repeating the same mistakes and witnessing another Shoah – to some memory

can become paralyzing. There are many Jews today who remain averse to all things German, and suspicious of all German people. To many, the notion of rebuilding ties with Germany, renewing Jewish life in Germany and Poland, and returning to writing the story of the Jewish people beyond what happened in the second world war, is tantamount to betraying the murdered Jews of Europe. The reluctance to let go of outrage and pain, feeling we owe it to the dead to stay angry and to avoid all things German, can often undermine the miraculous opportunities we have not to forget but to heal from our pain and suffering, and can even result in disdain for initiatives like the JCC in Krakow, the young German rabbis and cantors being ordained, and burgeoning festivals of Jewish culture, music, theater and the arts in Poland, feeling that nothing good can come of these efforts.

The tug and pull between remembering and moving forward, the past and the future, between vigilance and hope, can be trying – emotionally, spiritually and psychically. Whom do we trust? Is the remorse of our non-Jewish guide Thorsten Wagner, whose grandparents were Nazi sympathizers but who's part of a generation seeking to redeem themselves from their country's past, genuine? Is the passion of Janusz Makuch, the non-Jewish founder and director of the Krakow Jewish Culture Festival that draws over 50,000 people to Krakow annually for a celebration of Jewish music and the arts and concerts that bring together Muslim and Jewish artists, sincere? As a witness to their lives, I offer a resounding Yes. Still, the pull to remember can blind some. The late Columbia historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi wrote of our obsession with history – with chronicling dates, events, and data – that it can serve for some as a fallen religion, a replacement for a way of living and thinking that is devoted not only to the past but to the search for meaning as a foundation for a future. The risky and daring balancing of these impulses forms the complex landscape of memory and reinforces the ultimate goal of remembering our yesterdays: many joyous tomorrows.

The Indomitable Jewish Spirit.

Yom HaShoah programs at the JCC in the heart of Berlin with Polish and German dignitaries pledging their loyalty to the Jewish people and to humanity as Yiddish and Hebrew songs fill the spaces between their speeches. Synagogues of every denominational flavor dotting the streets of Germany's most cosmopolitan city. Full-on Lewandowski Friday night services preserving the classical German Shabbat experience. Young adults training to serve as liberal and progressive (read: Reform and Conservative) rabbis and cantors in communities throughout Germany and Europe. Singing Shalom Aleichem and Shabbat melodies on a Friday night in Berlin with these young leaders. Walking the streets of Krakow with Klezmer in the air, the gates of the new JCC wide open, no security, inviting anyone and everyone in for a taste of Judaism. Meeting Polish Jews, young and old, who insist, in spite of the horrific events that took place between 1939-1945 just over an hour away, that Jewish life in Poland is about more than those 6 years of anguish, extending back 1000 years and, if they have their way, extending further no less. Young non Jewish Polish volunteers who are fascinated with Jewish culture and with Jews who seek to return to their roots and are doing everything they can to help make that happen. The sparks of renewal of Jewish life in Germany and Poland are unmistakable, and remarkable.

Why would anyone return here to rebuild Jewish life? Some never left. Some never found another place to call home. Some feel safer living with a remorseful enemy than with one who doesn't even recognize their own brutality. Some have learned the biblical lesson – not analogous but instructive-- that often it is in the place of our deepest vulnerability that we discover our greatest strength. Why else would the Temple in Jerusalem have been built on the same mountain where Abraham nearly sacrificed Isaac?

I can't help but note that we are here tonight just days before the onset of Shavuot, the festival of the revelation of the Torah on Mount Sinai. In a fitting moment, our

last study session of the trip took place on Yom Ha'Atzmaut at the JCC in Krakow during which we shared Rabbi David Hartman's, z"l, essay, Auschwitz or Sinai, asking which of those two seminal events ought to serve as the organizing and inspiring narrative of Judaism today. There are those, as I said above, for whom Auschwitz serves as their Jewish rallying cry. To Rabbi Hartman, as to the members of the Krakow JCC (of which my family is now one), only Sinai, the story of seeking normative ways to live, to love, to learn, to care, to build and to protect and to sustain, can serve as the narrative to propel Jews and Judaism into a redemptive and robust future. In his words, "Auschwitz, like all Jewish suffering of the past, must be absorbed and understood within the normative framework of Sinai. We will mourn forever because of the memory of Auschwitz. We will build a healthy new society because of the memory of Sinai."

At the JCC in Krakow we were sitting an hour from Auschwitz, but we were truly at the foot of Mount Sinai. If only we could remember, Jews and all human beings, that no matter where we are on the planet, no matter how far we may descend into the fires of hatred, bigotry and savagery, Mount Sinai is always nearby, ready for us to ascend again to the heights of moral and spiritual sensitivity and accountability, a mountain located nowhere specific because it is everywhere, a mountain in the wilderness, in a place that's hefker, ownerless, because it belongs to all.

One final thought:

Today is Rosh Chodesh Sivan, the 1st day of the third month since the Exodus. On each Rosh Chodesh throughout the year, ritual sacrifices were to be made in the ancient Temple. In listing what kind of sacrifices were to be offered on this day, the Torah includes an unusual command: On the first of the month a sin offering for God is to be offered. A sin offering? Why would the occasion of the new moon, the new month, require that we bring a sin offering on God's behalf?

The Talmud suggests that God agreed to have a sin offering made on God's behalf because the moon was unfairly made smaller than the sun. But there's a deeper message embedded here, one that I believe was elucidated by Rav Soloveitchik. The waxing and waning of the moon, its continual shifting between fullness and emptiness, mirrors the continual shifting of human life between joy and pain, safety and vulnerability, peace and suffering. While we have come to accept the inevitable hardships that impose on life's blessings, while we know we must embrace the impermanence at the heart of life, we nonetheless reserve the right to express our outrage and our defiance that the beauty and holiness of life must endure inevitable periods of darkness and so, mythically, we hold the Source of Life accountable and on this day of life's monthly renewal, we bring a sin offering on the creator's behalf, giving voice to our remembrances of loss, even as we embrace the fullness of renewed possibilities.

I'm not sure what my reflections on our Journey of Remembrance and Renewal to Berlin and Krakow will amount to, but it feels auspicious to have shared them with you on this Rosh Chodesh, this new moon, days before we find ourselves once again at Sinai.

Shabbat Shalom.